

Disease, travel and vaccinations

You are planning to travel on vacation or business...does your destination require a vaccination?

If you are planning to stay in a resort or a city and you are in good health, you will probably have a safe and healthy trip if you take some minor precautions. However, if you are planning to travel to remote or poorer areas, especially in developing countries of the tropical zone, you may require a full set of immunisations and detailed medical advice before you leave. As immunisations may take up to 7 to 14 days to become effective, you should start your preparations early. Discuss your plans with your doctor or at your nearest travel clinic.

The following diseases are preventable with vaccination:

Diseases transmitted via food or drinks contaminated with faeces

Typhoid fever

Typhoid is a life-threatening illness, caused by bacteria called *Salmonella typhi* which initially reside in the digestive tract. Typhoid fever is characterised by high fever, headache, tiredness, loss of appetite and dizziness. Other symptoms include abdominal pain, nausea, chills, constipation or diarrhoea and intestinal perforation. The disease is prevalent in many developing countries of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and Central and South America.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A, a viral infection of the liver, is common in developing countries where sanitation is poor. In adults, Hepatitis A is often characterised by jaundice - yellowing of the skin - that can last a month or more. Other symptoms may include fatigue, nausea, abdominal pains, fever, pale stools and dark urine. There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A, however vitamins and liver-protecting drugs can be used.

Cholera

Cholera is a disease characterised by severe diarrhoea leading to rapid dehydration, which, if untreated, may lead to death within 24 hours. It is reported from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Europe, South and Central America, including Mexico.

Insect-transmitted diseases

Yellow fever

Yellow fever is a viral illness. The disease is carried by *Aedes* and *Haemagogus* mosquitoes in Central and South America, and in tropical regions of Africa. A mild

attack may consist of flu-like symptoms. More severe symptoms include nausea, vomiting, bleeding, abdominal pains and jaundice and the disease kills 60% - 70% of its victims. There is no specific treatment for yellow fever and the only efficient prevention is the routine vaccination of all persons at risk.

Japanese encephalitis

Japanese encephalitis is caused by a virus that infects the brain, leading to confusion and sometimes death. It is transmitted by mosquitoes of the genus *Culex* in various areas of Asia (from East India to Korea, Japan and Indonesia). The incidence peaks during the rainy season and at the beginning of the dry season.

Other immunisable diseases

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver that may lead to liver cancer and death. It is spread in the same way as AIDS, i.e. sexual contact with an infected person, exposure to contaminated blood, contact with used needles in drug abusers, body piercing and tattooing. It is widespread in many developing countries, especially in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the interior Amazon Basin and certain parts of the Caribbean. The symptoms are similar to those of Hepatitis A, but long-term complications are much more severe. There is no specific treatment, but vitamins and liver-protecting drugs may be used.

Meningitis (Meningococcal disease)

Meningococcal disease is a significant cause of illness and death worldwide. The meningococcal bacteria can cause meningitis (infection of meninges which surround the brain and spinal cord). The bacteria are usually spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing or direct contact. The symptoms of fever, headache and general malaise may look like those of less serious illnesses, but ultimately the disease can be fatal.

Tetanus, Diphtheria and Polio

Tetanus is a serious disease that causes muscle spasms that can lead to lock-jaw, breathing problems and even death. It is contracted when soil which is contaminated with animal faeces, enters cuts or wounds, such as burns.

Diphtheria is a bacterial disease of the respiratory passages, transmitted from person to person, which can result in severe heart disease. In developing countries, diphtheria is sometimes spread via unpasteurised milk.

Polio is a widespread disease in the developing world outside North and South America, which may result in paralysis of lower limbs. The polio virus is transmitted primarily through food or water contaminated with faeces.

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) bacteria cause infection of the lungs and occasionally other organs. Coughing, or even talking spreads bacteria from person to person. Certain types of TB can also be spread through unpasteurised milk. TB is more prevalent in the developing world, especially in hot climates. Symptoms of TB include persistent cough, weight loss, swollen lymph glands, fever and night sweats. Treatment with numerous antibiotics for 6 to 12 months is necessary.

Rabies

Rabies is a viral infection of the brain that can follow a bite, scratch or even a lick from an infected animal. The animal reservoir varies from one country to another (dogs, cats, bats, jackals, foxes, racoons, monkeys, etc...). Rabies is widely distributed throughout the world but is more common in developing countries. It is fatal if not treated, but can be prevented by prompt immunisation after exposure.

How can you prevent all these diseases?

- Drink only boiled or bottled water.
- Consume only well-cooked food.
- Do not eat canned food if the tin appears “blown” or “swollen”.
- Do not eat leftovers, food from street vendors, or unpasteurised dairy products.
- Never eat raw shellfish.
- Eat only well washed or peeled fruits and vegetables
- Use condoms for every new sexual contact.
- Never use syringes or needles used by other people.
- Never use another person’s razor, shaver or toothbrush.
- Do not get tattoos or have any part of your body pierced unless you are very sure about the hygiene.
- Avoid mosquito bites at night by limiting outdoor activity between dusk and dawn.
- Use a good insect repellent (reapply after swimming or sweating)
- Wear protective clothing to avoid insect bites (long sleeves and pants).
- Sleep in a screened area or under a mosquito net.
- Use mosquito coils or insect sprays.
- Do not drink unpasteurised milk.
- Avoid contact with wild animals. Remember, not all rabid animals behave ferociously - some may be docile.
- Do not go to crowded places where direct contact with persons infected with e.g. TB, cannot be avoided.

- Anyone potentially exposed to rabies must seek prompt medical attention, even if vaccinated.
- Get vaccinated against disease

Information about vaccination

Typhoid: One vaccine injection provides 3 years of protection.

Hepatitis A: The vaccine should be given at least 2 weeks before departure. One injection, followed by a booster dose 6 months later, ensures protection for 10 years.

Cholera: Oral cholera vaccine is available for adults and children over 2 years and protects for 3 years. There is a new vaccine which is more effective than before.

Hepatitis B: Travellers spending more than 6 months in high-risk areas and persons exposed to blood products (e.g. health care workers) or involved in sexual activities should consider vaccination against Hepatitis B. The vaccination schedule consists of 3 injections at 0, 1 and 6 months, which protects for 10 years.

Meningitis: Vaccination with the meningococcal vaccine is recommended for certain travellers to parts of Africa and the Middle East where meningitis is epidemic. The vaccine consists of a single dose, which confers protection within 10 days. A booster dose is given 3-5 years later. Vaccination is required for pilgrims travelling to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, for the annual Hajj.

Japanese Encephalitis: Travellers over 1 year of age visiting Asia during the high-risk season should consider vaccination. Vaccination involves 3 doses given at days 0, 7 and 28. A booster is required after a year and then every 3 years. (This vaccine is not usually available in Kenya and may be received at the destination.)

Yellow Fever: Get vaccinated against yellow fever if you are visiting a high-risk area. One injection confers protection within 10 days that lasts for 10 years. It is the only compulsory international travel vaccine required to enter certain countries.

Tetanus, Diphtheria and Polio: All people should receive their first (primary) immunisation series against these 3 diseases during childhood. A booster dose every 10 years is necessary for tetanus and diphtheria. Travellers visiting areas where polio is still prevalent should have had a primary immunisation series of polio vaccine and a booster within the last 10 years. If you have not received primary immunisation against these 3 diseases, please contact your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Tuberculosis: Check to see whether you received a BCG vaccination for TB at birth.

Rabies: If your travel involves frequent animal contact, e.g. veterinarians or hikers in high-risk areas, vaccination before departure is recommended. Pre-exposure vaccination consists of 3 injections at days 0, 7 and 28, followed by a booster 1 year later, with

regular boosters every 5 years. Vaccination after exposure to a bite consists of 5 injections: on days 0, 3, 7, 14, 28, followed by an optional booster at 3 months.